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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000235

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)  
SUBJECT: BJP DECLARES OPEN SEASON FOR POACHING KARNATAKA'S  
LEGISLATORS

REF: CHENNAI 231

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Closer cooperation between the two opposition parties in the South Indian state of Karnataka has, as expected, led the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to start encouraging opposition party members to defect. Four members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), two from the Congress Party and two from the Janata Dal (Secular) Party (JDS) have already bolted, allegedly for cash payments and ministerial positions offered by the BJP. The BJP's tactics look likely to drive the Congress and JDS, still reeling from their drubbing in the May legislative assembly elections, into closer cooperation. This newfound collaboration, while fragile, could assist the UPA both in the likely confidence vote over the civil nuclear agreement and in national elections required before May 2009. End summary.

Open season on opposition MLAs  
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¶2. (SBU) The July Fourth weekend created fireworks in Karnataka as the BJP's much-anticipated poaching of opposition MLAs began in earnest, with the party bagging four members of the opposition. The four MLAs, two from Congress and two from the JDS, resigned their seats and announced their intention to run in by-elections as BJP candidates, as required by India's anti-defection law. The resignations lowered the number of seats in the 224-member assembly held by the opposition from 108 to 104.

¶3. (SBU) A BJP spokesperson told us that his party's encouragement of the defection became necessary because of attempts by the Congress Party to bring down the BJP government. Our Congress Party interlocutors told us that their party had not attempted anything of the sort, claiming that the BJP was inspired more by its own fear that its thin majority (it holds 110 seats and is bolstered by the support of six independent MLAs) might collapse. The Congress members told us that the party would work hard to insure that its candidates defeat the defectors in the required by-elections. (India's anti-defection law requires defectors to resign their MLA seats and contest a by-election within six months.) Media reports and some of our contacts suggest that the defectors were lured with "bags of money" and ministerial posts. Three of the four former MLAs will be offered ministries on July 10, according to one report. (The BJP government has expanded the state's cabinet to include a whopping 34 ministers, or one ministry for every 3.4 members of the majority.)

Cooperation may help Congress in the national elections  
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¶4. (SBU) Although there is still much bad blood between the Congress Party and JDS in Karnataka (the JDS brought down a Congress-JDS coalition government in 2006 to form a ruling coalition with the BJP), the two parties have gradually increased their cooperation since the May legislative assembly elections. Not only did they coordinate their votes to select members to the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) and Karnataka's legislative council, they also worked in tandem to wrong-foot the BJP on the issue of alleged

fertilizer shortages in the state.

15. (SBU) Several of our interlocutors in Karnataka have said that this cooperation points to a possible electoral alliance in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) elections, which must take place before May 2009. Congress Lok Sabha member Tejasvini Gowda told us that she is actively promoting Congress-JDS cooperation. She said that the two parties could secure at least half of Karnataka's Lok Sabha seats if they worked together. Roshan Baig, a Congress Party Karnataka MLA, told us that such an alliance would be "the only way" that his party could get a majority of Karnataka's 28 Lok Sabha seats. H.D. Revanna Gowda, son of JDS leader and former Prime Minister Deve Gowda, told us that he expects the two parties' cooperation to lead to a "long-term relationship." (Comment: The two parties tend to compete for many of the same voting blocs. This often splits these blocs, allowing a third party -- usually the BJP -- to win a particular district. Running joint candidates, or not challenging each other in particular districts, could prove a powerful electoral strategy in the state. End comment.)

Comment

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16. (SBU) The cooperation between the JDS and Congress Party in Karnataka is still fragile, but headed in a direction suggesting it will continue to strengthen. Nationally, it appears that the two JDS members in the Lok Sabha from Karnataka will side with the UPA in the anticipated confidence vote. This bodes well for an alliance in the coming national polls, but the time between now and May 2009 represents more than a few lifetimes in India's often unpredictable politics. End Comment.

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